

Laudatio on behalf of the honorary doctorate for Alcinda Honwana at Utrecht University, by Birgit Meyer, honorary supervisor

Back in 2007, Alcinda Honwana was appointed on the Prince Claus Chair for Development and Equity here at UU to mark her brilliant contribution to the study of youth and violence in Africa. At that time, she had already conducted ground-breaking research on the unsettling phenomenon of spirit possession in post-civil war Mozambique, where the spirits of dead soldiers kept on haunting those who had fought in and survived this war. When she took up the Prins Claus Chair, she had just embarked on her research on the phenomenon of “child-soldiers.” Of course, this term - “child soldier” - is a highly disturbing one by itself: it combines two positions in life that are held to contradict each other - that of children who are vulnerable and need care, and that of soldiers who are expected to fight and kill. Based on extensive interviews with former “child soldiers” in various African countries, Honwana marvelously unpacked the structural social-political and economic circumstances under which children are drawn into situations in which they feel they have to accept being turned into warriors. In so doing, she showed how this shocking reality conflicts with modern ideals about childhood as a phase of dependence and care. These are, of course, laudable normative ideals, but alas not a suitable assumption to guide research. In many contexts across the world, children grow up under highly precarious circumstances that challenge the modern, bourgeois assumption of a clear boundary between childhood and adulthood. This important, empirically grounded, insight has consistently inspired Honwana’s research up to the present moment.

As a major voice in the study of youth and society, she developed the concept of waithood, which she understands as a prolonged liminal phase between childhood and adulthood: a limbo in which young people are deprived of the necessary social and economic resources to become independent. Waithood, Honwana stresses adamantly, does not only pertain to youth in Africa, with its comparatively young population, but also to youth in, for instance, Japan, Europe, the UK and the US, where they find it increasingly difficult to become financially independent and start their adult lives. The structural problems that create a state of waithood in these countries are different, but the situations are similar, in that young people are bound to a state of sheer endless waiting – for education, a job, a house. Waithood is a symptom of the failure of states to provide citizens with basic social and economic resources. And yet waithood, as Honwana insists, does not simply mean a state of being passive, but also unleashes protest and produces creative initiatives for alternative ways of living, as has been the case, for instance, in the Arab Spring in North-Africa and in youth protest movements in countries as Senegal. So, taking Honwana’s lead, we are well advised as scholars and responsible citizens to pay detailed attention to such states of waiting with a critical eye that seeks to identify both their causes and signs for new departures – also in the current “Corona” pandemic.

Honwana’s internationally acclaimed work on waithood helps us grasp the predicament of youth in a global context shaped by neo-liberal policies. Thus, it offers a major contribution for imagining a viable future in these precarious, unsettling times. Throughout her career she consistently sought to translate her insights into social development policy in various arenas, from the Social Science Research Council to various institutions within the United

Nations. She ably combined working in policy bodies and at high profile research institutions, like the Open University, UK, and the London School of Economics with which she is affiliated at this time.

Crucially important, her sound ethnographic, and empirical work is grounded in the contexts of her research, yet always leads beyond them. As the chair of the International African Institute, Honwana is one of the most prominent scholars who shows how to rethink research in the broader social sciences and humanities *from* Africa. In so doing, she excels through her ability to spotlight hidden, Eurocentric assumptions in the study of youth, culture and society, and opens up new pathways for the long overdue decolonization of knowledge production in scholarly research. Offering a role model for compassionate, engaged scholarship, she shows impressively how anthropology matters to understand and intervene in our globalized entangled world.

I got to know Alcinda Honwana more than twenty years ago, when she worked on spirit possession. Since then I have followed her work with keen interest, admiration and amazement about her enormous productivity and engagement. Still she remains open and accessible - a wonderful person to communicate and be with. As her honorary supervisor, I am delighted that our university decided to confer this honorary doctorate on her, and I trust that this will further consolidate her relation with Utrecht, and open possibilities for further collaboration.